

## 6 Modern Poltergeist Research—A Plea for an Unprejudiced Approach

HANS BENDER

### SYNOPSIS

*With this chapter we are confronted with phenomena of a different order of magnitude from any that we have previously encountered and accordingly we are forced to submit to an even greater strain on our credulity. The fastidious reader must be warned that this is very strong meat indeed. Faced with the bizarre array of gothic wonders which are here brought to light he may well wish to exclaim, in the words of the worthy gentleman whom the author quotes below: 'Did the sun of the Enlightenment shine in vain?'*

*The trail of the poltergeist is paved with booby-traps for the unwary and to tread it at all demands courage and a cool head. It is greatly to the credit of the author, Director of the Freiburg Institute and one of the only two individuals to hold a Chair in parapsychology at a European University,\* that he is not afraid to enter this treacherous terrain. Poltergeist research could be compared with an attempt to study electricity by observing only flashes of lightning! The typical poltergeist outbreak is of short duration and, by the time the investigator has arrived on the scene, the phenomena are likely to be already on the wane. To make matters worse, the publicity which such events usually attract in the press and the excitement they generate in the neighbourhood produce an atmosphere which is anything but conducive to serious scientific fieldwork. All too often, even if the phenomena were genuine to start with they become overlaid with the handiwork of hoaxers and practical jokers. There is, moreover, as the author explains, a kind of in-built elusiveness in the phenomena which makes them 'observer-shy'.*

*Nevertheless, we are not entirely helpless in this situation. Modern electronic technology which has made it notoriously easy to 'bug' the homes or offices of unsuspecting citizens can here be turned to*

\* The other is Dr Martin Johnson at the University of Utrecht.

*good advantage in tracking down the poltergeist and alerting us to what is going on. The Freiburg Institute have already availed themselves of these new monitoring facilities.*

*Yet, despite the fact that so many cases have been recorded and in such detail ever since the Middle Ages, the author admits that we are not much nearer to a proper understanding of the phenomena.*

*It is true that we no longer ascribe them to malicious spirits but the part played by the 'poltergeist focus' is anything but clear. Some theorists have gone so far as to suggest that there is a kind of psychic force emanating from the subject's body which is responsible for the effects observed. However, when one considers the amount of energy that is required—sometimes heavy articles of furniture are moved which the subject would be incapable of pushing or pulling using all his muscular strength—this seems somehow implausible. For my part, I think it more helpful to think of the subject as unleashing ordinary physical energy that is present in the environment to serve devious ends, rather as if a lightning conductor were able not merely to channel the path of the electric discharge but could somehow induce it out of the atmosphere. The author wisely refrains from committing himself on the theoretical issue but he does bring out clearly that the typical poltergeist phenomenon is not just an un-directed release of energy, like an explosion, but is a controlled operation which, to all the world, looks like the work of invisible hands.*

*Poltergeists have become all the more important to parapsychology since the virtual disappearance of physical mediumship. The astonishing incidents which surround the young Annemarie during the now famous Rosenheim case, which is here described at some length, are in some ways reminiscent of the sort of things that were reported from the séances of Eusapia Palladino or others of her like during the heyday of Spiritualism. There are even some indications that certain mediums began their careers as poltergeist children. It has been the author's hope to be able to tame the poltergeist powers by converting their human focus into a serviceable special subject for experimental parapsychology though, so far, his efforts in this direction have been largely frustrated. But, whether Annemarie is to be regarded as an incipient physical medium or a latter day witch, there is a nice sense of modernity in her choice of her employer's telephone system and electrical appliances as the target of her witchcraft:*

*Although the Freiburg Institute has investigated some 35 alleged poltergeist outbreaks since the War, the author rightly gives pride of*



place to the *Rosenheim* case, not only because of the spectacular or fantastic nature of the phenomena but because a variety of circumstances combined to make it one of the most evidential of modern times which has had a far-reaching effect on German public opinion. For, it was not just parapsychologists who were eager to get to the bottom of this mystery but also the post office authorities and telephone engineers, the municipal power station and, last but not least, the police! In addition the services of two physicists from the prestigious Max Planck Institute were called upon and both were baffled and impressed.

Bender continues his survey with two more recent cases from the files of the Freiburg Institute, the Pursruck case of 1970–71 and the Scherfede case of 1972–73. In both of these the role of poltergeist focus seems to have been filled by a pubescent girl but, whereas the Pursruck case is, relatively speaking, a routine affair with the archetypal noises and knockings which the word 'poltergeist' originally suggested, the Scherfede case is in a class apart, involving as it does the paranormal displacement of large quantities of water. A 'water-poltergeist' is a very great rarity in the literature—Owen (1964) lists only a few such cases, mainly from late nineteenth century America—so any poltergeist fancier can account himself lucky to have come across even one such case. If, as the author maintains, no natural explanation can be found for the extraordinary happenings he describes in this connection then, in its flagrant and anarchic violation of natural law, it exceeds anything we have had to reckon with in this book.

*The trail of the poltergeist, as I have already remarked, is beset with untold obstacles and hazards. Whether, as the author suggests, it will also prove in the end to be the royal road to an enlargement of our understanding of ourselves and our universe is a point which must be left to the reader to ponder.*

Editor

In his most informative book *Can we explain the Poltergeist?* A. R. G. Owen explains the origin of the German word 'poltergeist', which is now more commonly used in English than in my own language. The word means a 'noise spirit' and was current in Germany in Reformation times, being used by Luther to describe a noisy, racketing type of demon (Owen, 1964). In a classic of poltergeist literature *The Night-Side of Nature* of 1848 (cited in Sitwell, 1940), Catherine Crowe included a chapter 'The Poltergeist of the Germans' which later served as a basis to formulate

the definition of poltergeist activity as employed by Andrew Lang and Frank Podmore.

Owen adopted the definition which seemed acceptable to Lang and Podmore and states it as follows:

'Poltergeist activity is the occurrence of one or both of the following, taking place in an apparently spontaneous but often sporadic way:

- a. Production of noises, e.g. tappings, sawings, bumpings.
- b. Movement of objects by no known physical means.'

As Owen shows in his book, the poltergeist is actually a much more complex phenomenon. But these basic features may do for the introduction to this paper in which I will comment on some new German poltergeist cases.

## THE BARRIER OF PREJUDICE

Poltergeist phenomena are still highly controversial. Antagonists of psi regard them as the peak of superstitious beliefs. Adherents—laymen and scientists—who accept unexplainable occurrences in the realm of extrasensory perception often seem reluctant to include in their positive attitude the reality of events which affect the sanctified laws regulating the behaviour of physical objects. This reluctance does not date from modern times. As I pointed out in my Presidential Address to the Parapsychological Association (Bender, 1969), it has a long history and seems to be rooted in some basic personality structure. There have always been 'goats' and 'sheep', disbelievers and believers, in regard to the paranormal and especially to physical phenomena. I need only cite Joseph Glanvil, one of the first members of the Royal Society who, in 1666, began his famous report on a poltergeist case by saying he knew very well '... that the present day world treats all such stories with laughter and derision and is firmly convinced they should be scorned as a waste of time and old wives' tales ...' (Glanvil, 1721).

Although reported through the centuries, poltergeist phenomena have always been in the twilight of delusion and fraudulent manipulation. Trickery, bad observation, hallucinations have been mentioned as plausible causes for the alleged poltergeist outrages. The reports were scorned. Andrew Lang's courageous breakthrough was walled up again by a generation of disbelievers who put forward the 'naughty little girl' theory or suggested that



earth movements due to subsidence, underground water, or to tidal action cause movements of the structure of buildings, and therefore noises and possibly movement of objects inside the buildings.

C. G. Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist, struck at these kinds of generalised, evasive statements when he wrote in the preface to Fanny Moser's book *Spuk*: 'The prejudice dominating in many places in regard to the factual reports here in question shows all the symptoms of a primitive fear of ghosts. Even educated people who should be better informed, use occasionally the most absurd arguments, become illogical and deny the testimony of their own senses' (Moser, 1950).

The prejudice against poltergeist phenomena can be overcome only by an impartial scientific investigation of a problem which seems to be as old as mankind. The Poltergeist is a challenge for scientists and one which parapsychologists, after a long period of purely laboratory experimentation, are beginning to accept. The lifting of the taboo was accompanied by a new change in nomenclature: poltergeists which, according to Jung, seem to arouse a fear of spirits, are now neutralised by the scientific name of 'Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis' (RSPK). There is no question any more of such a thing as a 'poltergeist' existing as an entity and capable of manifesting independently of any human 'focus'. In 34 of 35 cases which the Freiburg Institute investigated since 1948—some at first-hand, some at second-hand—the poltergeist focus has been an identifiable human being, generally a youngster. Thus, defence mechanisms against a frightening world of demons seem unnecessary. Only one of our cases was that of a classical 'haunted house'. Visual and acoustical phenomena, as well as displacement of objects, had been observed for a period of 60 years. I admit it is difficult to cope with cases of this kind as they show but little analogy to what we observe in our experimental laboratory research.

### PATTERNS OF POLTERGEIST OCCURRENCES

Unexplainable incidents of a physical nature have been reported for centuries with a remarkable uniformity. A survey of historical cases in comparison with modern ones can be found in Moser (1950), Owen (1964), Thurston (1954) and others. Striking similarities in the cases observed throughout the centuries in all countries are emphasised by these authors, especially by Owen. An analysis of recurrent patterns in recent reports of poltergeist phenomena

has been undertaken by the French police officer Emile Tizan . His work (Tizan , 1951), is based on a great number of cases of alleged poltergeist events investigated by the French police between 1925 and 1950. Among the uniform patterns Tizan  found in comparing the independent reports I call special attention to the following:

- a. Bombardment. Often a house becomes the object of a real hail of projectiles. Stones fall on the roof, break panes, and penetrate through openings. Phenomena rarely occur in the interior of the house once outside bombardment from the exterior begins.
- b. Bangs against doors, the walls, or the furniture are heard, sometimes at the same place and sometimes in all parts of the house.
- c. Doors, windows and even securely closed cupboards open by themselves.
- d. Objects are skilfully displaced or thrown. Fragile ones are often unbroken, even after a jump of several feet while solid ones are sometimes completely destroyed.
- e. Bizarre cracks and noises are sometimes observed.
- f. Displaced objects sometimes do not show a 'regular' trajectory. They behave as if they had been transported and may even follow the contours of furniture.
- g. In some rare instances, foreign objects penetrate into a closed space.
- h. When handled by observers, the objects give a sensation of being warm.
- i. Objects seem to form themselves in the air.

I lay special stress on the oddity of the phenomena in question precisely because they have an extremely important bearing on the problem of how we can explain the poltergeist and come up with a workable theory. They represent a sort of counterpoise to the carefully investigated analogies of RSPK with familiar energetic processes which Artley and Roll (1971) have recently described. Their analysis suggested that the energy responsible for the occurrences was attenuated with distance and that there had been a conversion of psi energy to kinetic energy. An exponential decay curve was found to fit the data best. This stems from the Seaford case which was investigated by Pratt and Roll (1958). Like the later Newark and Miami cases, which were investigated by the same team, it did *not* show any of the 'oddities' of Tizan 's list. There was nothing unusual about the trajectory of the objects. Thus, there was no suggestion that they turned corners; the landing



place of an object was always consistent with a straight motion from its point of origin. There was no penetration or 'tele-apportation' into a closed space, nor formation of objects in the air, etc. Obviously, there are various types of poltergeist incidents, and we do not yet have the slightest idea whether different forms of 'psi energy'—if there is such a thing—are involved, or only one and the same psi process with different manifestations. All we can actually do in search of a theory is to review the variety of patterns that we find reported from all over the world and in all ages and try our best to assess their authenticity.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA**

In both ongoing and retrospective cases the first concern of the investigators is, of course, to find out if the alleged phenomena are suggestive or not of RSPK. Alleged poltergeist phenomena may simply be due to a misinterpretation of a natural cause: in one of our cases loud thumps accompanied by vibrations of the walls of a little house were found to be stemming from a defect of the water pipes. Deliberate trickery in the beginning of alleged poltergeist cases seems to be rarer than the 'naughty little girl' theory supposes. But as a matter of fact it happens rather often in the course of the investigation of a genuine case when scientists with tape recorders and cameras are eagerly expecting phenomena and are slowly losing patience. The transition from unconsciously produced genuine phenomena to trickery often seems to stem from the same motivational source: the trend to hoax as a form of aggressive discharge of inner tensions. Semiconscious or unconscious fraud is sometimes to be found in cases in which hysterical persons are involved, who in a pathological state similar to that of sleep-walking, induce poltergeist-like phenomena.

In most of the 35 cases investigated by the Freiburg Institute it was easy to determine the 'poltergeist focus', usually an adolescent. The phenomena seem to be connected with the presence of the focus person and to occur in his vicinity. This raises the problem of distance, a still rather obscure topic of RSPK research. In the well known Rosenheim case there is fairly good evidence that PK phenomena happened in the lawyer's office when an employee, Annemarie Sch., the undoubted focus, was 1500 yards away. Some cases seem to indicate an unconscious co-operation of two persons, e.g. mother and child or sisters as in the Pursruck case which I will describe later. If it is not obvious who is the

focus, systematic elimination of the persons involved in the poltergeist events may help to determine the relevant person.

As to witnesses' statements it goes without saying that a perfect agreement may be due to a 'fable convenue' or confabulation, that is, by relating over and over again the astonishing phenomena, a certain version gets itself adopted. If there was any suspicion of a 'fable convenue', I found it helpful to reconstruct the alleged phenomena by the use of photographs and/or film with a view to controlling the witnesses' statements. The reaction to the reconstruction as shown by the individual witnesses may be most informative for their original observations.

Objective documents, taped and filmed records of poltergeist occurrences, are highly desirable but difficult to obtain. We use television cameras, videotape recorders, etc., to monitor the situations where poltergeist phenomena may possibly show up. A laboratory on wheels, a Volkswagen-Bus, serves for the instalment of the supervising devices. Thus we try to elude as far as possible a disturbance of the spontaneous display of the phenomena by visible technical arrangements. So far, we have had but little success in obtaining objective recordings but in the end, we did succeed in videotaping the sudden rotation of a painting in the Rosenheim case and also in detecting the trick of a 10 year old youngster who, after producing what was almost certainly genuine PK phenomena, had become a 'naughty little girl' who threw objects and broke panes. Incidentally, an objective documentation of genuine events and of trickery has to cope with the same difficulties. Needless to say, the evidential value of taped or filmed records of poltergeist occurrences is entirely dependent on the integrity of the experimenters.

If a poltergeist case seems to show matter through matter penetration, the technique of sealing the boxes and cupboards into which or out of which objects are alleged to move can be reinforced by using light responsive photo-electric switches acting on a release which triggers photo or film cameras or videotape recorders. The ideal instrument to control the trajectory of objects which are said to come out of closed spaces would be a high frequency camera yielding up to 10 000 shots per second. Documents of this kind would perhaps enable us to discuss on an empirical basis the hypothesis that penetrating objects have been dematerialised and then rematerialised—a somewhat artificial postulate which, of course, has no background in established physical laws.

Attempts to provoke poltergeist occurrences through post-



hypnotic suggestion of the presumed focus person have not yet been successful in our investigations. In some cases it was not possible to induce a deep hypnotic trance in the subject, in others we had to respect the wish of the parents to abstain from any measures which could alter the subject's state of consciousness. However, the method is promising as Dr Bjerre's success in the Karin case shows (Bjerre, 1947).

Poltergeist cases should always be analysed in terms of a 'field theory': the interaction between the focus person and the social situation in which the poltergeist phenomena show up has to be carefully studied with a view to an understanding of the motivation underlying PK phenomena. This analysis implies, of course, a study of the personality structure of the subject with appropriate methods such as life data, test data of various kinds and questionnaire data (Mischo, 1958).

In all cases where laboratory experimentation with the subjects was possible, we found highly significant ESP scoring but could not elicit experimental PK.

#### **A CHANGE OF ATTITUDE TOWARDS POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA IN WESTERN GERMANY**

At the end of the fifties, an Institute for Public Opinion Research, in collaboration with the Freiburg Institute, undertook a representative Gallup poll on the attitude of Western German adults towards poltergeist phenomena and haunted houses. It was learned that 72% of the adult population hold that such alleged phenomena are pure superstition. Eighteen per cent are convinced that these strange things really happen and the remaining 10% have no opinion. This distribution proved not to be stable. When the Rosenheim poltergeist case and the result of our investigation in collaboration with physicists became known, the percentage of believers rose by 10% to 28% in Bavaria, where regional television broadcasts were aired. In the meantime, it had become widely known that the investigation of the Rosenheim poltergeist case had been sponsored by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Association for the Advancement of Science), an official body which subsidises research. This fact contributed to overcoming public reluctance to accept research of this kind. Thus, the Rosenheim case became a kind of 'break-through' for an unprejudiced attitude towards RSPK phenomena in Western Germany and other German speaking countries. An analysis of other special circumstances, both parapsychological

and sociological, may be helpful in understanding this change of attitude.

#### **THE ROSENHEIM CASE 1967-68**

At the end of November, 1967, inexplicable events were reported in the German press to be taking place in a lawyer's office in the Bavarian town of Rosenheim. Electric bulbs exploded, neon lights attached to a ceiling 2.5 metres high went out time and again. Electricians found them unscrewed from their sockets by about 90 degrees. Sharp bangs were reported, automatic fuses were said to have blown without cause, and developing fluid in photo-static copying machines spilled many times. The work of the lawyer's office was severely impaired by telephone disturbances which had already been observed in the previous summer: the four telephones often rang simultaneously, conversations were cut short and the telephone bills rose to an unusual height.

The lawyer and his personnel suspected disturbances in the power supply as the cause of the strange occurrences. The maintenance department of the municipal power station and the post office authorities started a thorough investigation: monitoring equipment was introduced to measure fluctuations in the power supply and an automatic counter installed which registered number, time and length for every call made in the office. The monitoring instruments registered large deflections that sometimes appeared simultaneously with the abnormal phenomena and persisted even when—as a last trial to exclude undetectable causes in the general power system—an emergency power unit was installed to ensure 'undisturbed' electric current in the lawyer's office. The counter of the post office registered innumerable calls of the time announcement number (0119), often dialled six times a minute and this for weeks.

The Bavarian and the General Western German Television produced broadcasts about this unusual case by the end of November, 1967, which since then have become almost historic documents. They show the destructions in the lawyer's office, the instalment of the monitoring equipment, the statements of the perplexed technicians, the complaints of the lawyer and the authoritarian affirmation of an official of the post office that this perfect organisation is always capable of detecting disturbances and that the 0119 calls must have been dialled in the office. The employees denied having done the calling.



The broadcast ended with the open question: Are the strange occurrences due to a technical defect or to mischief? But who could be interested in such continued practical jokes? This was the situation when, on December 1st, 1967, the Freiburg Institute began its investigation.



Figure 6.1 Annemarie Sch. Investigators from the Freiberg Institute concluded that the poltergeist phenomena exhibited in the Rosenheim Case were connected with Annemarie.

We found that only during office hours did the unusual phenomena and deflections of the monitoring instruments occur. A first deflection was often registered at the very minute when Annemarie Sch. (see Figure 6.1), a 19 year old employee, crossed the threshold of the office in the morning. When this young girl walked through the gangways, the lamps behind her began to swing with increasing amplitude (see Figure 6.2). If bulbs exploded, the



Figure 6.2 Photograph of the swinging lamps in the lawyer's offices. The phenomenon only occurred during office hours when the secretary Annemarie Sch. was in the building.

fragments flew towards her. In addition, the number of phenomena decreased with increasing distance from Miss Sch. It became obvious that we were dealing with RSPK connected with Annemarie.

We had first to rule out the hypothesis of disturbances in the



power supply. Two physicists, Dr F. Karger and Dipl. Phys. G. Zicha from the Max Planck Institute for Plasmaphysics in Munich, observed and examined the recorder deflections and systematically eliminated or checked every conceivable physical cause. They could definitely prove that the anomalous deflections were not caused by mains voltage rises. They came to the following conclusions:

1. Although recorded with the facilities available to experimental physics, the phenomena defy explanation with the means available to theoretical physics.
2. The phenomena seem to be the result of non-periodic, short duration forces.
3. The phenomena (including the telephone incidents) do not seem to involve pure electrodynamic effects.
4. Not only do simple events of an explosive type take place, but also complicated motions (e.g. recorder curves, moving pictures).
5. The movements seem to be performed by intelligently controlled forces (e.g. the telephone incidents) that have a tendency to evade investigation.

The discovery of the PK nature of the occurrences led to an intensification of the events: paintings began to swing and to turn, drawers came out by themselves, documents were displaced, a 175 kilogram cabinet moved twice about 30 cm from the wall, etc. Annemarie Sch., getting more and more nervous, finally displayed hysterical contractions in her arms and legs. When she was sent on leave, nothing happened, and when she definitely left the office for a new position, no more disturbances occurred. But similar events, less obvious and kept secret, happened for some time in the new office where she was working (cf. Bender, 1968 and 1969, Karger and Zicha, 1968).

The Rosenheim case involved about forty first-hand witnesses who were thoroughly interrogated, among them technicians, the criminal police (lawyer Adam had placed an accusation against the unknown), physicians, journalists, clients of the office whose testimonies could be compared with our own observations. The final result of the investigation was broadcast by Western German Television. The controlled publicity of the case, the shift from a misleading technical interpretation to the PK evidence which could be followed up by millions of spectators led to the breakthrough in public opinion.

### THE PURSRUCK CASE 1970-71

The changed attitude towards poltergeist phenomena became symptomatically manifest in the behaviour of the catholic priest, Rev. Jakob Wolfsteiner, who is in charge of the pastoral duties in the small village of Pursruck, 40 miles east of Nuremberg. In November 1970 two girls, Helga, 13, and Anna R., 11, were living for some time with their grandmother in a former old schoolhouse. After a resident of the ground floor of this building had died, tappings and bumpings were heard. Disturbing noises continued for about three weeks. Each resident of the house accused the others of producing the noise.

At the end of May, 1971, the tappings began again. In addition scrapes and sawings were heard when the two girls went to bed, about 8 p.m. The noise seemed to come from the beds, but also from cupboards and doors. It was like the hammering of a machine gun interrupted by intense bangs. The same phenomena showed in the house of the girls' parents, and the knocking was even heard in the street. The family felt terribly disturbed. As the noises seemed to come from the beds, hammocks were arranged for the girls in a special room in the hope that the tapping would now come to an end. But the noise continued, now in the form of a scratching.

Everyone in the region knew about the phenomena and people got more and more excited. Some spoke of 'witchcraft' and nailed twigs against the door in order to drive away the evil spirits, others thought of practical jokes, scolding the two girls for their cheeky tricks. Newspapers were full of suppositions, water diviners pretended to discover underground water-courses which they declared to be the answer to the riddle. In this phase a student from Freiburg registered the tappings on a tape recorder. He found that they were strongest when the two girls were together in bed, less strong when Helga was alone, and quite low, when only Anna lay down.

As the excitement about the phenomena kept growing, Rev. Wolfsteiner took the two girls with their parents to his parsonage in Lintach, a place next to Pursruck. The two girls lay down on a wooden table, and the tappings immediately began. Knockings were also heard when they stretched themselves out on the carpet in the parsonage, as many witnesses testify. All these phenomena were tape recorded. From the pulpit Rev. Wolfsteiner declared that there was no reason to believe in demonic influences. He



declared that a new science, parapsychology, examined such phenomena called 'psychokinesis' and explained that they can unconsciously be produced by certain persons. Scientific investigation, he continued, had to exclude fraud. He announced experimental research into this case and proceeded to personal observations. He presented a report of his research to the Freiburg Institute. The following extract shows that he worked like a well trained parapsychologist:

'In the evening of June 19th, 1971, I went to Pursruck with the agreement of the parents and the children of the family R. I took along my Contaflex camera with long distance objective, an electric flashlight, and a tape recorder. The girls were in their beds. In the first minutes, they were covered with their blankets, holding their hands folded on their foreheads. Later on, the girls' father took away the blankets so that their feet and their whole body could be seen. Tappings were to be heard. I took about 16 flashlight photographs which can be controlled on the tape, as the closure of the camera can clearly be recognized with each photograph. At first I took the flashlight snapshots in the dark. Then I observed the girls in the light of an electric torch. Tappings appeared when the girls lay completely quiet in their beds and went on when I spoke to them. After these observations I was definitely convinced that the girls could not possibly have caused the phenomena with their hands or other parts of their bodies.'

Rev. Wolfsteiner had, previous to this experiment, called Father Dr A. Heimler, psychotherapist, for help in observation and therapy. Father Heimler made the children execute rhythmical dances in order to relax them and succeeded in calming their anxiety. His report, too, is a document of the changed attitude towards poltergeist phenomena. I want to cite a few passages:

'It seems that the poltergeist (the unconscious) reacts directly to hot rhythms and answers, at least partially, according to the beat music of the "Manhattan" and to the clapping of the "Spare-Hully-Gully".'

'The noises cannot be exactly localized. They mostly seem to come from the beds in which the girls are lying. It is obvious that the kind of support determines the type of noise. When the support is smooth and elastic—i.e. when the girls are sleeping in the hammocks—there is only a scratching to be heard. When a board is put into the hammocks, a tapping appears. However, these noises can also come from a distant cupboard door.

Once, the cupboard door opened with a loud bang and glasses in the cupboard fell to the ground from the vibration and broke into pieces.'

The phenomena, Dr Heimler points out in his report, appeared for the first time on the day following the death of a resident of the old school house. Helga, who looked from her window directly over the cemetery and the mortuary where the corpse had been taken, was frightened and could not fall asleep. She was thinking of a ghost story which her teacher had told months ago. When she first heard the tappings, she thought that the dead man was announcing himself in this way. Then she discarded this interpretation and thought, just like her sister Anna and her grandmother, that the dead man's wife was beating out her blankets in the night. The second poltergeist period at the end of May 1971 was preceded by anxiety dreams which clearly showed puberty problems (a man standing in her bed is threatening her with vipers). Father H. concludes his report with the remarks:

'The phenomena are certainly not sufficiently explained by puberty crises . . . It remains a riddle, why these tensions could discharge themselves in paranormal effects and not in another way . . . In the Pursruck case they ought to be regarded as a public appeal to humanitarian understanding as well as a challenge for considering the reality of the paranormal.'

The pioneer work of the two priests had perfectly prepared the investigation of the case by the Freiburg Institute. When we arrived on the spot, the phenomena were still going on. We succeeded in making videotape recordings while the girls were in bed and the tappings appeared in different intensity. Rapid knockings, raps and heavy bangs could be registered. One heard Helga saying 'I am so frightened'. The father reported an observation which frightened him in his turn: alarmed by the tapping phenomena, the girls came to their parents' beds. Mr R. rose and saw that suddenly the bedside rug rolled up 'all by itself'. We rearranged this situation and filmed it.

Once the paranormal origin of the tapping phenomena was established, we lifted for a while our controlling measures in order to get a more detached climate. We suggested asking questions to the 'tapping spirit'—as the phenomenon was jokingly called. The girls should begin to ask for the number of persons present and slowly proceed to easy arithmetic tasks. Our interest in this experiment was therapeutic as well as scientific: the girls should assume an active determined attitude towards the phenomenon



in order to overcome their anxiety. They accepted this idea with enthusiasm, but when we, again, applied more strict controls, it became obvious that they cheated by knocking with toes or fingers against the bedstead. Questioned, they first looked for excuses, but then admitted their fraud. Our measure had its therapeutic success. The frightening side of the phenomena was somewhat banished for them, but for the investigation of the paranormal aspect it meant a short circuit. We invited the children for a recreation holiday in the Black Forest; they were taken care of by clinical psychologists. ESP tests brought a slightly positive result. In August, the parents informed us about new phenomena, but it could not be cleared if they were genuine or fraudulent. A new experimental supervision yielded no positive results.

Of course, the change of attitude which became obvious in the Pursruck case is not a general one. There are still fanatic disbelievers which by their affective statements against the paranormal give away their own complexes. Thus, a public prosecutor wrote in an article 'The Curious Science of Poltergeist Professors' (Kriminalistik, July 1970); 'As a matter of fact, there is a close connection between the disgusting and bloody superstitious belief in witches and parapsychology. We are sick of the cadaverous smell that professors of old blew into our nostrils with their atrocity stories . . . Did the sun of the Enlightenment shine in vain?' We often cite this remarkable statement as an example of negative superstition.

### THE SCHERFEDE CASE 1972-73

In the last days of 1972, the magistrate of the administrative district Warburg-Land in Westphalia, 25 miles west of Kassel, applied to the Freiburg Institute for an investigation of mysterious water phenomena which had occurred for several weeks in Scherfede, a big village of 3000 inhabitants. The phenomena began in September 1972 in one of the small houses of a settlement which a building society had erected at the end of the fifties. Small puddles of water appeared first in the bathroom, then in the kitchen and in other rooms. Mechanics checked the water pipes and the heating tubes but could not find any leakage. In October and November humid spots showed on the walls, carpets became wet but the underlying structures proved to be dry. Pools of water also appeared outside the house and several times the outer walls were wet. It looked like the splash of a watering can or a pipe. A technician in charge of the water supply of the village, checked

time and again without being able to find the slightest hint where the water could come from.

A dramatic escalation began on December 10th. In intervals of 20-30 minutes, big water puddles appeared in the drawing room of the house. The family K.—father, mother and a 13-year-old girl Kerstin—heard a splashing when they were in another room. Nothing happened when they were present, and no one has ever seen a pool in formation. Technicians came and admitted that they were completely puzzled and could not find any cause. Trickery was excluded by carefully observing the room in question. At 7.30 p.m. neighbours of the next but one house came and asked for help: floods of water had suddenly appeared on the second floor and were coming down the staircase. There was too much to mop up with floor cloths. Helpers formed an echelon and brushed it out of the house. They were still at work when an hour later help was claimed for the next house where unexplainable water pools and splashes appeared and, another hour later, the same happened in the adjoining house, the last one of the row. This continued, more or less intensely, for three days.

The technicians cut off the water at the main in the first house, of the family K., but water pools and splashes appeared nevertheless. A probe was taken and examined in a chemical laboratory of Paderborn which was in charge of the routine supervision of Scherfede's water supply. It proved to be identical with the water of Scherfede's springs. Experts were brought into play, building technicians, geologists and hydrologists. They were unable to find any rational cause for these flabbergasting events and finally advised the local authorities and the magistrate of the administrative district to apply to the Freiburg Institute as they all had heard of the Rosenheim and Pursruck cases. In the meantime the newspapers reported on the 'water poltergeist' of Scherfede and the witnesses were presented in a television broadcast.

The Freiburg team arrived on January 4th, 1973. The last phenomenon had happened in December, 1972, in the house where the occurrences originated. We were told that firemen of Scherfede were posted as guards in the house K. One of them had observed that in the very moment when for a while he turned his head, a pool of water had appeared on the floor of the kitchen.

We explored many witnesses, photographed the traces of the water disaster in the different houses and could easily discern the direction of splashes on the furniture and other forms of the water



invasion: big spots on the ceilings and walls and distorted wooden bars of the parquet floor.

Fantastic hypotheses about the cause of the amazing phenomena circulated in Scherfede. A number of people connected them with the construction of a new highway-bridge near to the houses, and thought of the pressure of underground water, others supposed that gases in the room condensed to water. Some older people remembered that the territory belonged to the church and supposed demonic influences. Right from the beginning of our research we were confronted with whispered hunches that the water disaster had to do with the 13 year old daughter Kerstin of the family K. We followed them up and found that Kerstin used to go to the lavatory in other houses. In two cases it had been observed that a water pool showed when Kerstin had used the lavatory. In the house of a fireman, near to the houses of the settlement, a water pool had once appeared when Kerstin came from the toilet. One of the families which later on had to suffer during the escalation—which lasted from December 10th to December 14th—forbade her to enter their house. Kerstin had never used the toilet of the house adjacent to that of her parents. The two families were not on good terms. Nothing happened in this house.

It was difficult to interrogate Kerstin. Both she and her parents were reluctant to allow personal interviews. We were asked why we concentrated on her and did not pay the same attention to others. She reacted to a first interview with tears, and we could not apply the whole battery of psychodiagnostic tests which we had prepared for her. But we succeeded in tranquilising her and the parents and did our utmost to keep our suspicion secret that she is the 'poltergeist focus'. An open agreement with the whispers in the village would have been a burden for her and the family. We hope to continue the clinical analysis of the case which already shows hints in the direction of what the German psychoanalyst Schultz-Henke calls an 'urethral neurosis', a syndrome characterised by a desire to dominate on the basis of an ego-weakness.

Under these circumstances our conclusion that the water occurrences are psi events probably dependent on the girl Kerstin was confidentially given to the authorities who had applied to us and made known in public only in a general way.

The Scherfede case presents many interesting features. The most striking one is for me the matter through matter penetration

which seems to be involved. The analyses of the probes showed that the pools are tap water. It is most likely that it came out of the water pipes or the heating system with its boiler. If we had been present during the three days when the phenomenon was escalating we should have stained the water in the water-pipes with a methylene blue dye and the water in the heating system with 'eosine', a special red dye. Another striking feature is the distance in regard to the probable focus Kerstin. She was not present in the houses where successively the phenomena showed. The last house is about 300 metres away from her residence. The phenomena do not show any sign of attenuation implied by Artley and Roll (1971) with their concept of an 'exponential decay curve', indicating a spatiotemporal correlation between a person and the disturbances. In this case I cannot find the slightest hint of a 'conversion of psi energy to kinetic energy' as these authors suggest as fitting their own data best.

In the sociological context the Scherfede case presents another example for the change of attitude towards unexplainable phenomena in the physical world: the widespread information on poltergeist events induces official authorities to apply for a parapsychological investigation.

It looked like a meaningful coincidence that returning home from Scherfede, I found on my desk an issue of the Italian magazine *Annabella* with an article 'in questo bambino c'è il demonio?' (Is this child possessed by the devil?)—the story of a 9 year old boy who, hospitalised with a virus hepatitis in the clinic San Francesco in Nuoro (Sardinia) 'made water spout from the floor and knocked pieces of furniture down without touching them'. This happened at the end of November, 1972. The article cites the director of the clinic, Prof. Giuseppe Marras, who stated: 'The phenomenon of the water splashes on the floor is genuine. There is no doubt. I have seen it with my own eyes. I understand that people ask for an explanation, but I must confess that I cannot give any. Shall I speak of psychokinesis, parapsychology and things like that? I could do it but you know that this new branch of science cannot explain it either'. Other cases of unexplainable water occurrences have been reported. It would be rewarding to follow up thoroughly this pattern of RSPK.

The increasing interest in psi phenomena in my country, which was partly stimulated by the exciting reports in the mass media on scientifically investigated RSPK cases, led to public discussions with leading physicists. Thus—to give an example—the Catholic



Academy of the Archbishop of Freiburg twice invited representatives of theoretical and experimental physics for panel discussions with parapsychologists. Wolfgang Büchel (Bochum), Helmut Hönl (Freiburg), Pascual Jordan (Hamburg), Jürgen Petzold (Marburg), all well known professors of physics, and Friedbert Karger (Max Planck Institute for Plasmaphysics in Munich) admitted ESP and PK as facts and as a challenge for their science. No model of reasoning could be offered for an integration of psi in the actual frame of the natural sciences, and in regard to RSPK and PK, it was widely discussed whether phenomena in the material world which happen in connection with psychic events would ever become an object for physics as science of matter.

Let me terminate with two of the final statements the physicists gave on the panel discussion. Prof. Jordan said:

'If we estimate the psi phenomenon of the so called "clairvoyance" type as real, it would be almost inconsistent in terms of physics to doubt in principle the possibility of PK, for it is one of the most general and profound of all basic laws of physics that every action is accompanied by a corresponding reaction. If there is a paranormal influence on states of the mind by objective events of the outer world in the form of clairvoyance, then it is logical to assume that conversely an influence of psychic forces on material objects of the outer world exists.'

Dr Karger said:

'We have investigated with particular intensity a case of RSPK. This was the Rosenheim case, 1967. In the course of this investigation we came to the conclusion that it cannot be explained by the means of today's theoretical physics. On the other hand we ascertained its existence by means of the same experimental physics. I cannot offer any model which seems to fit these phenomena. That they really do exist could be established with the utmost certainty.'

Poltergeist phenomena are, I believe, a *via regia* or royal road to an extended understanding of man, of his position in nature and of nature herself. The time has surely come to abandon our antiquated prejudices.

## REFERENCES

Artley, J. L., and Roll, W. G. (1971) 'Mathematical Models and the Attenuation Effect in Two RSPK (Poltergeist) Cases.' *Proc. of the Parapsychol. Assoc.*, No. 5, 29-31

- Bender, H. (1968) 'An Investigation of "Poltergeist" Occurrences.' *Proc. of the Parapsychol. Assoc.*, No. 5, 31-33
- Bender, H. (1969) 'New Developments in Poltergeist Research.' Presidential Address, Twelfth Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association, New York City, September 5, 1969. *Proc. of the Parapsychol. Assoc.*, No. 6, 81-102
- Bjerre, P. (1947) *Spökerier*. Centrum, Stockholm
- Glanvil, J. (1721) *Sadducismus Triumphatus, or, A Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions*. In two parts, 4th edition, London
- Karger, F., and Zicha, G. (1967) 'Physical Investigation of Psychokinetic Phenomena in Rosenheim, Germany, 1967.' *Proc. of the Parapsychol. Assoc.*, No. 5, 33-35
- Mischo, J. (1958) 'Personality Structure of Psychokinetic Mediums.' *Proc. of the Parapsychol. Assoc.*, No. 5, 35-37
- Moser, F. (1950) *Spuk. Irrglaube oder Wahrglaube?* Preface by C. G. Jung. Baden bei Zurich
- Owen, A. R. G. (1964) *Can we explain the Poltergeist?* Garrett Publications, New York
- Pratt, J. G., and Roll, W. G. (1958) 'The Seaford Disturbances.' *J. Parapsychol.*, 22, 79-124
- Roll, W. G. (1972) *The Poltergeist*, Nelson Doubleday, New York (1972) and New American Library PB, New York (1973)
- Sitwell, S. (1940) *Poltergeists*. Faber, London
- Thurston, H. (1954) *Ghosts and Poltergeists*. Henry Regnery, Chicago
- Tizané, E. (1951) *Sur la Piste de l'Homme Inconnu. Les Phénomènes de Hantise et de Possession*. Paris